Gulf of Maine
Coastal Program

Protecting and restoring wild Atlantic salmon habitat

Atlantic salmon runs were once so numerous in the northeastern United States that their abundance was taken for granted. But in the 1700's and early 1800's, water pollution, overfishing and the construction of impassable dams led to the disappearance of salmon in many New England rivers. By the late 1800's, only a few rivers in Maine sustained wild salmon runs. Today, in spite of significant progress in reducing water pollution, improving fish passage, managing fisheries, and reintroducing salmon, wild salmon runs only remain in a handful of Maine rivers. Currently, the Sheepscot and Ducktrap Rivers in mid-coast Maine, Cove Brook in the Penobscot watershed, and the Pleasant, Narraguagus, Dennys, Machias and East Machias in downeast Maine are the focus of state and federal habitat protection and restoration efforts. Several issues present opportunities for collaboration in the ongoing efforts to restore native salmon in Maine's rivers:

- obstructions to fish passage -- there are several thousand man-made dams in Maine,
- loss of spawning and nursery habitat — from riverbank erosion, water withdrawal and clearing of riverbank vegetation, and
- potential genetic and disease problems between wild and aquaculture salmon.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Gulf of Maine Program, working with the Maine Fisheries Resource Office and other USFWS field offices, state agencies, non-profit organizations, industry representatives and stakeholders, is assisting with mapping spawning and nursery habitat, developing watershed land cover information, providing assistance to watershed coalitions by identifying potential threats to salmon survival, providing technical assistance to partners in assessing and restoring natural river channels, and developing on-the-ground partnerships to protect salmon habitat.

Dennys River

Juvenile Atlantic salmon

Mapping and distribution habitat information: Working with data collected by the USFWS Maine Anadromous Fish Program and the state's Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission, the Gulf of Maine Program has mapped spawning and nursery habitat. Gulf of Maine Program provides this information to fisheries managers who use the maps and data to determine the optimal number of young salmon to stock in order to enhance survival rates. Gulf of Maine Program also provides this information to forest product companies to promote sensitive land management practices near salmon spawning and nursery areas, and to watershed coalitions to catalyze and inform habitat protection and restoration projects.

Assessing and restoring habitat: Gulf of Maine Program is working with others to develop a regional curve for Maine that will provide critical information on the relationship between channel geometry and drainage area. This information will provide baseline information to better inform restoration work on Maine's rivers. Gulf of Maine Program is using natural channel design principles to guide its habitat restoration projects.

Providing assistance to watershed coalitions: Gulf of Maine Program provides technical assistance to public/private watershed coalitions, including the Downeast Salmon Federation, Project SHARE, Quoddy Regional Land Trust, Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association, Ducktrap Coalition, Atlantic Salmon Federation, Trout Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy (Maine Chapter), and Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission. From 1997 through 2003, the Gulf of Maine Program has administered the Maine Atlantic Salmon Conservation Fund, a grant program funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. In addition, Gulf of Maine Program has provided funds through the USFWS Private Landowner Incentive Program. Five million dollars from these two federal funding sources, combined with more than $9 million in funds and technical support from many other partners have supported:

- permanent protection of 21,000 acres and 84 river-miles along salmon rivers,
- watershed coordinators to conduct outreach, develop landowner contacts, and prioritize, plan and implement restoration and protection projects, and
- restoration projects at 56 sites, where barriers to fish passage, non-point source pollution, and excess sedimentation have been eliminated.

For further information, please contact:

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